Ethel Smyth

**Ethel Smeye-th**

**Born:** April 23rd, 1858, London, United Kingdom

**Died:** May 8th, 1944, Surrey, United Kingdom

**Period of Music:** Late Romantic Era / Early 20th Century

“Because I have conducted my own operas, love sheep-dogs, seized a chance conducting from the window of my cell in Holloway Prison with a tooth-brush, and don't always make sure that my hat is on straight, in a certain sense I am well known.” – Ethel Smyth

**Biography:**

Young Ethel Smyth was not a prim and proper Victorian lady—she was very active and enjoyed golf, cycling, horse riding, foxhunting, and mountaineering. Her father was involved in the military which led to their family traveling between India and England and gave Ethel a taste for travel and adventure. When she was only 19 years old, she insisted on traveling to Leipzig to study music and composition. There she composed music which was performed in Germany and England (often with herself conducting) and attracted the attention of such musical giants as Brahms, Dvořák, Clara Schumann, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky. While she attained great success as a composer, she is also well known for her role in the suffragette movement, and at one point was thrown in jail for her protesting.

Besides music, she wrote ten books in which she discussed everything that interested her, from feminism and politics to Old English sheep-dogs, which she raised throughout her life. She was a militant feminist determined to bring about social change. Undaunted by her arrest, she wrote a song entitled “The March of the Women,” which she conducted from her prison cell with a toothbrush. “The March of the Women” later became the battle song of the Women's Social and Political Union. Despite her non-conformist reputation, she was made a Dame of the British Empire (DBE) in 1923.

She wrote six operas, the most famous being *The Wreckers*. In another, *The Boatswain’s Mate*, she voiced her political inclinations and this opera became part of the standard repertory of the Old Vic. Critics speak of the “sincerity and seriousness” of Dame Ethel’s works, but in her own opinion she never became “even a tiny wheel in the English musical machine.” She confessed to having the attributes of “an iron constitution, a fair share of fighting spirit, and, most important of all, a small but independent income” without which she was sure she would not have been as successful.

Compared with the conventional music of the late nineteenth century, Dame Ethel's music contains some unusual harmonic experiments. In *The Wreckers*, for instance, there is an odd blend of the styles of Richard Wagner and Sir Arthur Sullivan. Her deafness, which began later in her life during the late 1920’s, may have had something to do with this. She died in 1944 at age 86 of pneumonia after a prolonged illness. Her music is as curious and interesting as herself.
Quick Facts:
- In 1903 at age 45, her opera *Der Wald* was performed at the Metropolitan Opera of New York. It remained the only opera written by a woman to be performed at the Met for more than 100 years.
- In prison, she organized sports activities and was observed conducting the inmates marching in the yard by keeping time with her toothbrush.

Selected Compositions for Listening:
Spotify Playlist URL: [https://tinyurl.com/smythlisten](https://tinyurl.com/smythlisten)

- 3 Songs: No. 1: The Clown
- The March of the Women (Excerpt: Last Two Verses)
- Serenade in D Major: II. Scherzo: Allegro vivace – Allegro molto
- Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello in D Major: I. Allegro non troppo
- String Quintet in E major, Op. 1
  - I. Allegro con brio
  - V. Allegro molto
- Violin Sonata in A Minor, Op. 7: I. Allegro moderato
- Piano Sonata No. 1 in C Major: I. Allegro vivace
- Concerto for Violin, Horn, and Orchestra: I. Allegro moderato

Other Suggested Listening:
- Serbescu, Liana. *Complete Piano Works*.

Learn More about Ethel Smyth:
- Account of the opera *Der Wald* at the NY Metropolitan from the Met archives
- 52Composers.com: Ethel Smyth